

The Victim

Dave Powell

THE sky was overcast and the air was damp and chilling. Bill pulled his coat collar up and reached into his pocket for a smoke. He was out. His fingers closed around a crumpled bit of paper. He had just sold his watch for five dollars. It was every cent he had.

Bill hadn't realized that a year could pass so slowly. Twelve months all in one stretch, it was the longest sentence he'd served. Jail was no novelty to Bill, but the State Penitentiary—. When had it all begun? Where had he really slipped up? Sure he'd quit high school after the first semester, but so had plenty of other guys. Well, his home life had never been much—crummy neighborhood, crummy pals, crummy women. Yeah, he'd made a few mistakes, but he'd had a lot of tough luck too, more than his share of rotten breaks. He'd been in one scrape after another, never for anything big though, always strictly small-time. Petty was the word that best described his life. Honesty, pride, integrity, these words had never had a place in his vocabulary. Things were gonna be different from now on though. Honesty, pride, integrity—Bill mouthed the words. They sounded good, fresh and clean-like. They made him feel good. Sure, he could do it, why not? He'd get a steady job, work hard, be respectable. Bill thrust back his shoulders, his eyes reflected determination, his face took on a look of resolution. This time he would really start a new life.

Bill stopped at a drugstore for a pack of smokes. The salesgirl was speaking intently with a young man. Bill coughed and asked for a pack of Camels. The girl gave him the cigarettes, took his money, and counted out his change. "Twenty-five, fifty, one, two, three, four, five, and five's ten, thank you," she said, and immediately resumed her conversation with the young man. Bill hesitated a moment, then jammed the money in his pocket. He pushed through the door and walked away to begin his new life.